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UNCLAS PORT AU PRINCE 001274

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: MAY 4 REPATRIATION OF 132 HAITIAN MIGRANTS

1. Summary. On May 4, the Coast Guard cutter Dependable repatriated to Haiti 132 migrants who claimed to have left Cap Haitien on Haiti's northern coast in the early morning of April 27. The Dependable interdicted the migrants in a 35-foot sail freighter 30 nautical miles east of Great Inagua, Bahamas in the early morning of May 1. This is the first repatriation in several months, but could represent the start of the "spring rush". Several migrants interviewed by Emboffs indicated that they had taken to sea due to instability, unemployment, and misery in Haiti. They also indicated that they would do so again if the situation did not improve. End Summary.

2. The USCGC Dependable intercepted the sail freighter on May 1, approximately 30 miles east of Great Inagua, Bahamas. 30 adult females, 101 adult males, and one fifteen-year-old boy disembarked the sail freighter and boarded the Dependable. Almost all of the migrants were under 40 years old. The Dependable dropped the migrants at Killick Naval Base in Port-au-Prince on May 4, where the Haitian Coast Guard and the Office of National Migration processed them and gave them travel money (300 Gourdes, app. 7 dollars each) and, for the first time, t-shirts that read (Embassy informal translation): "Do not risk your life by getting on a migrant boat. You will never make it."

3. Onboard the Dependable, migrants initially claimed to have departed from Gonaives on April 25 headed for the United States, but this story did not make sense. 85 of the migrants listed Cap Haitien as their home, and all those interviewed later by Emboffs indicated that the boat had set out from Cap Haitien. While a couple of migrants said that the destination was the Bahamas, others stated that they had set forth with no particular destination. All of the interviewed migrants cited crime, disorder and lack of work as their reasons for taking to sea. Many of those interviewed also indicated that they would set sail again if the situation did not change in Haiti.

4. Most returning migrants were evasive regarding how much they had paid for the voyage and who had planned it. Several said that each paid what he could, and that the trip was the result of a four-month fundraising effort among young people in Cap. They stated that some on the boat were in charge of directing it, but that it had no captain. No one provided a clear answer as to how the group had acquired the boat. A couple of men stated that while they had left with supplies, these had quickly run out and they had been at sea two days without food or water. These men stated that their situation had been grave, and they were happy to see the Cutter when they did.

5. With respect to their time on board the Dependable, the migrants stated that the Coast Guard treated them well, allowing access to toilets and showers, but they complained that they weren't fed very much. They all acknowledged receiving two hot meals a day.

6. A larger than usual group of Haitian press (13 journalists) attended the repatriation. Press reaction in the media focused on the likelihood of the migrants going to sea once more, as well as their motivations for leaving.

7. Comment: While this was the first migrant interdiction/repatriation in several months, it might represent the beginning of a larger "spring rush". Migrants interviewed in previous repatriations have done more hedging on whether they would take to sea again, whereas Emboffs saw a definite response of "if the situation doesn't improve, yes I will go again", and a couple of migrants said "better to die at sea than get killed in Haiti." End Comment.

GRIFFITHS